



Board Meeting

Minutes of the **Natural England** Board meeting held on 24 September 2025

Attending Board members

Dr Tony Juniper	Chair
Peter Unwin	Deputy Chair
Dr Alastair Leake	
Mark Tufnell	
Professor Clare Fitzsimmons	
James Scott	
Dame Caroline Spelman	
Professor Mel Austen	

Executive Team

Marian Spain	Chief Executive (and ex-officio Board member)
Kirsty Carter-Brown	Chief Officer, Business Management
Sallie Bailey	Chief Scientist
Oliver Harmar	Chief Officer, Strategy
Alan Law	Chief Officer, Operations

Defra Group

Edward Barker	Director, Natural Environment, Trees and Landscapes
Rachel Fraser	Finance Director
Jen Garrett	Director, Human Resources
Angus Anderson	Deputy Head of Communications (Deputising for Ilana Conn)

Guests

Rachel Francis	Director, Legal and Governance
Kim Nobbs	Government Internal Audit Agency (item 4)
Alastair Wager	Deputy Director, Nature Restoration Fund (item 5)
Craig Thomas	Environmental Delivery Plan Strategy Principal, Nature Restoration Fund (item 5)
Edel McGurk	Director, Regional Operations, South East (item 6)
Hannah Wood	Deputy Director, Strategy (item 7)
David Drake	Director, Connecting People with Nature (item 8)
Adelle Rowe	Director, External Affairs, Board & Executive Services

Apologies

Professor Lynn Dicks	Board member
Cynthia Alers	Board member
Kim Shillinglaw	Board member
Sally Randall	Defra Director General, Environment, Rural and Marine
Ilana Conn	Director, Operational and Local Communications
Julie Castell	Board Apprentice
Navroza Ladha	Chief Officer, Legal, Governance and External Affairs

Item 1 Welcome from the Chair and Declarations of Interest

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed the Board, Executive and guests to the 129th Board meeting. There were no updates reported on Board Register of Interests.
- 1.2 Apologies were received from Board members: Cynthia Alers, Professor Lynn Dicks and Kim Shillinglaw.
- 1.3 The Board wished Navroza Ladha well with her recovery and note a temporary Chief Officer for Legal Governance and External Affairs will be appointed in the interim period until Navroza returns.

Item 2 Review of 30 July Minutes and Matters Arising

- 2.1 The Board approved the minutes, subject to some minor amendments.
Action: Board and Executive Services
- 2.2 The Board approved the Matters Arising Report without any amendments.

Item 3 Chief Executive's Report

- 3.1 Marian Spain presented her report to the Board. Marian gave detailed updates on the following topics:

British Ecological Society Appointments

The Board acknowledged and congratulated Mel Austen's appointment as President-elect and Natural England's Chief Scientist Sallie Bailey on becoming a [Fellow](#) in the British Ecological Society. The Board congratulated them on their appointments and noted the ecological boost this membership would bring to their Natural England roles.

Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT)

Natural England continues to monitor progress but there are some concerns that the scheme take up by farmers remains low. This may be due to the slight delay in the [guidance](#) being issued to farmers and landowners who could be concerned about how these environmental land management practices will be funded in the future. It was noted by Board that this scheme is in its early days, and it asked the Natural England Farming Board subgroup to pick up these challenges in their meeting on the 25 September and write to the farming minister setting out the points raised at the meeting.

Action: Natural England Farming Board subgroup to pick up these challenges in their meeting on the 25 September and write to the farming minister setting out the points raised at the meeting. **Alan Law.**

Heather and Grass Burning

Following Defra's [announcement](#) on the restrictions of burning on heather Marian reported that Natural England is monitoring the impact of the changes to the licensing system. During discussion the Board noted and approved the ask for the Natural England Science Advisory Committee to consider and report back to the Board on the impact of vegetation recovery following burning.

Action: Natural England Science Advisory Committee to consider and report back to the Board on the impact of vegetation recovery following burning. **Sallie Bailey.**

Cunliffe Report

Marian advised Natural England has given advice on government's response to the [review](#). Natural England are well-integrated into the cross-Defra decision making on the government response. Focus is currently on the role of the national regulator, the regional boards, and beginning to consider what this means for wider change.

In discussion the Board asked for a webinar to discuss Natural England response to the National Audit Office (NAO) review of regulation.

Action: Board webinar to be set up to discuss Natural England response to the NAO review of regulation. **Oliver Harmar/Board and Executive Services.**

Exercise Pegasus

Natural England is participating in a major cross-government pandemic-based exercise and expects to use the lessons learnt to address gaps in its crisis management and business continuity arrangements.

The Board noted the update and asked that the Natural England Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) prepare a summary report at a future Board meeting.

Action: Exercise Pegasus to be put on ARAC forward look and a summary report to be provided at a future Board meeting. **Nick Beech**

Business Planning

The Board noted the significant impact concerns on the reduction of baseline funding and that hard choices may be needed when this returns for more detailed discussion at the November Board meeting.

- 4.1 Rachel Francis introduced the item and set out the purpose of the session which was to provide Natural England Board with the assurance that the required controls to manage the Natural England Annual Report and Accounts (ARA) are in place for 2024-25 reporting and subsequent years.
- 4.2 The Board was asked to note the Government Internal Audit Agency Advisory (GIAA) Report on the ARA Process (August 2025) and its recommendations which identify areas for improvement.
- 4.3 The Board was asked to note the next steps which are:
- Natural England Delivery Committee (DelCo) to oversee the effective processes to identify and escalate matters that are material to the ARA and establish a working group to progress.
 - An update on the progress of the Action Plan is scheduled to return to ARAC on 15 October.
 - The timetable to laying the ARA 2024-25 by April 2026 remains challenging and any risks will be updated to Natural England Executive Committee, and ARAC (and DelCo if relevant).
- 4.4 The Board approved the paper recommendations and endorsed the approach, subject to updating the responsibilities annex shared in the meeting to reflect the working groups.
- 4.5 In discussion the Board asked the Natural England ARAC to agree cross-Defra Group approach to challenges around putting value to heritage land.

Action: The Board approved the paper recommendations subject to updating the responsibilities annex shared in the meeting to reflect the working groups.
Rachel Francis.

Action: The Board asked the Natural England ARAC to agree cross-Defra Group approach to challenges around putting value to heritage land.
ARAC

Item 5 Nature Restoration Fund (NRF)

- 5.1 Oliver Harmar introduced this session and provided the Board with an update on the current position since their last update at the July Board meeting.
- 5.2 The Board noted the significant deliverability risk NRF exposes Natural England to. The Board noted this will return in November as a substantive item at the November Board meeting.
- 5.3 It was agreed that the Natural England Chair would write to Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Secretary of State (SoS) with propositions to be resolved.

Action: Natural England Board Chair to write to Defra/MHCLG SOS with propositions to resolve. **Tony Juniper**

Item 6 **Surrey Hills National Landscape Boundary Review**

- 6.1 Edel McGurk set out the proposal and the Board was asked to consider, in accordance with Natural England's [Non-Financial Scheme of Delegation](#) (Part 12):
- the final technical assessments of whether Natural England should vary the boundary of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)
 - a draft Order regarding the extension of the Surrey Hills AONB;
 - whether to proceed to a formal period of Notice.
- 6.2 The Board unanimously agreed the technical assessment and approved the move to formal notice period in due course.

Item 7 **NE New Strategy draft**

- 7.1 Hannah Wood presented the session, and the Board was asked to:
- review the draft Natural England Strategy content and design (including case studies and evidence popouts)
 - delegate approval of any further changes to the Chief Executive.
- 7.2 The Board approved the draft Strategy and agreed this could move to launch stage. The Board noted the internal Strategy launch event on the 6 November and regional roadshows 10-21 November.

Item 8 **Risk Appetite**

- 8.1 David Drake introduced this item and reminded the Board of progress to date and asked the Board to:
- Note the final risk appetite positions agreed at the 2 April 2025 Board and a summary of progress in the subsequent development of Risk Appetite Statements.
 - Note the alignment between development of Natural England's Risk Appetite Statements and the new Natural England Strategy.
 - Note how Risk Appetite Statements are expected to be utilised during implementation of the new Natural England Strategy.
- 8.2 In discussion the Board asked to see a wider view of risk at the November board meeting. To include appetite, current risk register and mitigation and to use these to inform/shape future Board meeting agendas and papers.

Action: To include appetite, current risk register and mitigation and to use these to inform/shape future Board meeting agendas and papers. **David Drake.**

Item 9 **Board Effectiveness Review Action Plan**

- 9.1 Adelle Rowe led the session, and the Board was asked to review the Action Plan resulting from the Board Effectiveness review and confirm they are content. Where appropriate, Board members should consider what

they can do to support the actions.

- 9.2 The Board agreed the Action Plan subject to clarification of a proportionate approach to measuring Board member time/costs. It was noted the Board opposed detailed time recording.

Action: Explore practical options for accounting for Board member time. **Adelle Rowe/Rachel Francis.**

Item 10 **AOB/closing remarks**

- 10.1 The Board reflected on the success of the guest speaker at the dinner the previous evening and how having a local voice on a themed subject, and a clear provocation, helped to prepare for the meeting on the next day.

Action: Keep Board informed about development of trusted partner work so they can support stakeholder engagement. **Alan Law.**